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"The votes aren't there," said RSC Chairman Jeb Hensarling (Texas), explaining why the RSC membership hasn't formally backed an earmark moratorium for RSC members, let alone the Conference as a whole. "That's your answer."

Hensarling praised the 21 Republicans who have signed a personal earmark moratorium, joined by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), and said the RSC has put earmark reform on the party's agenda.

"That's progress. I don't think that's success," he said, adding that Republicans need to put more distance between them and Democrats on the issue. Hensarling said he and others will keep plugging away.

"I have learned that it looks great on television to score a touchdown with a bomb, but 20 plays running off tackle at three yards at a time can get the job done."

Rep. John Campbell (Calif.), chairman of the RSC's Budget and Spending Task Force, said talk of forcing a vote on a moratorium by the full Republican Conference has stalled.

"There is some sense that we would lose and that would set the cause back," Campbell said.

“We don’t want to stop the momentum right now. We’re obviously going to continue to make noise about it.”

Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), the leading anti-earmark bomb-thrower, said he’s not sure an RSC vote on an earmark moratorium would help much. “You’re not going to get everybody,” he said, and even a vote by perhaps 70 members of the group would only be a minority of the minority. Flake held out some hope that a vote in the full Conference would succeed, however, and said it is still an option to write a letter forcing that vote.

Flake said he is going to see if he can get a vote on an earmark moratorium on the House floor as part of the debate on the budget, matching an effort by Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) in the Senate, and he and other earmark foes are vowing many more votes on appropriations earmarks this year if they are unsuccessful.

“Nobody’s taking us very seriously now because they know for every Rangel Center there is a Lewis Center,” he said, referring to earmarks named for Reps. Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.) and Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.).

Rep. Mike Pence (Ind.), a former chairman of the RSC, has advocated a GOP-only moratorium this year even though he has sought earmarks every year. Pence said the Conference as a whole should address the issue rather than just the RSC.

“Now is the time for bold strokes. Nothing short of a Conference-wide moratorium on earmarks will capture the attention of the American people,” he said.

Pence said he has not decided whether to request earmarks this year.

Even if the party were to adopt a moratorium, it's unclear if they would be able to enforce it.

Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), an appropriator, said that he might not go along with a moratorium even if the Conference adopted it.

"If the Conference voted to say we're not going to have any members request earmarks, I don't know if it would be in my best interest to go along with that," he said. "For the life of me, I just don't understand why Members of Congress shouldn't have a say in how a very, very small portion of the budget gets spent."

As for Waxman, he said he privately has urged Democratic leaders to adopt a moratorium, without apparent success. Waxman said people have lost confidence in the process, and he ripped Republicans as hypocritical because they presided over an explosion in the number of earmarks.

He also dismissed the position of the Conference, which has called for a time-out on earmarks until a commission meets to write earmark rules.

"They want to take the political position of being against earmarks but still get their earmarks," he said.